

EGYPTIAN ORNAMENT.

THE Architecture of Egypt has this peculiarity over all other styles, that the more ancient the monument the more perfect is the art. All the remains with which we are acquainted exhibit Egyptian Art in a state of decline. Monuments erected two thousand years before the Christian era are formed from the ruins of still more ancient and more perfect buildings. We are thus carried back to a period too remote from our time to enable us to discover any traces of its origin; and whilst we can trace in direct succession the Greek, the Roman, the Byzantine, with its offshoots, the Arabian, the Moresque, and the Gothic, from this great parent, we must believe the architecture of Egypt to be a pure original style, which arose with civilisation in Central Africa,* passed through countless ages, to the culminating point of perfection and the state of decline in which we see it. Inferior as this state doubtless is to the unknown perfection of Egyptian Art, it is far beyond all that followed after; the Egyptians are inferior only to themselves. In all other styles we can trace a rapid ascent from infancy, founded on some bygone style, to a culminating point of perfection, when the foreign influence was modified or discarded, to a period of slow, lingering decline, feeding on its own elements. In the Egyptian we have no traces of infancy or of any foreign influence; and we must, therefore, believe that they went for inspiration direct from nature. This view is strengthened when we come to consider more especially the ornament of Egypt; the types are few and natural types, the representation is but slightly removed from the type. The later we descend in art, the more and more do we find original types receded from; till, in much ornament, such as the Arabian and Moresque, it is difficult to discover the original type from which the ornament has been by successive mental efforts developed.

The lotus and papyrus, growing on the banks of their river, symbolising the food for the body and mind; the feathers of rare birds, which were carried before the king as emblems of sovereignty; the palm-branch, with the twisted cord made from its stems; these are the few types which form the basis of that immense variety of ornament with which the Egyptians decorated the temples of their gods, the palaces of their kings, the covering of their persons, their articles of luxury or of more modest daily use, from the wooden spoon which fed them to the boat which carried their similarly adorned embalmed bodies across the Nile to their last home in the valley of the dead. Following these types as they did in a manner so nearly allied to their natural form, they could hardly fail to observe the same laws which the works of nature ever display; and we find, therefore, that Egyptian ornament, however conventionalised, is always true. We are never shocked by any misapplication or violation of a natural principle. On the other hand, they never, by a too servile imitation of the type, destroyed the consistency of the representation. A lotus carved in stone, forming a graceful termination to a column, or painted on the walls as an offering to their gods, was never such a one as might be plucked, but an architectural

* In the British Museum may be seen a cast of a bas-relief from Kalabshee in Nubia, representing the conquests of Ramses II. over a black people, supposed to be Ethiopians. It is very remarkable, that amongst the presents which these people are represented as bringing with them as a tribute to the King, besides the leopard skins and rare animals, ivory, gold, and other products of the country, there are three ivory carved chairs precisely similar to that on which the King sits to receive them; from which it would appear that these highly-elaborated articles of luxury were derived by the Egyptians from the interior of Africa.

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representation; in either case the best adapted for the purpose it had to fill, sufficiently resembling the type to call forth in the beholder the poetic idea which it was sought to supply, without shocking his feeling of consistency.

Egyptian ornament is of three kinds: that which is constructive, or forming part of the monument itself, of which it is the outward and graceful covering of the skeleton within; that which is representative, but at the same time conventionally rendered; and that which is simply decorative. In all cases it was symbolic, and, as we have observed, formed on some few types, which were but slightly changed during the whole period of Egyptian civilisation.

Of the first kind, viz. constructive ornament, are the decorations of the means of support and the crowning members of the walls. The column only a few feet high, or one forty or sixty feet, as at Luxor and Karnac, was an enlarged papyrus plant: the base representing the root; the shaft, the stalk; and the capital, the full-blown flower, surrounded by a bouquet of smaller plants (No. 1, Plate VI.), tied together by bands. Not only did a series of columns represent a grove of papyri, but each column was in itself a grove; and at No. 17 of Plate IV. we have a representation of a grove of papyri in various stages of growth, which would only have to be assembled as they stand, and be tied round with a string, and we should have the Egyptian shaft and its highly-ornamental capital; and further, we have in Nos. 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, on Plate IV., painted representations of columns forming parts of temples, in which the original idea is unmistakably portrayed.

We may imagine it the custom of the Egyptians in early times to decorate the wooden posts of their primitive temples with their native flowers tied round them; and this custom, when their art took a more permanent character, became solidified in their monuments of stone. These forms, once sacred, their religious laws forbade a change; but a single glance, however, at Plates VI. and VI.*, will show how little this possession of one leading idea resulted in uniformity. The lotus and papyrus form the type of fifteen of the capitals we have selected for illustration; yet how ingeniously varied, and what a lesson do they teach us! From the Greeks to our own time the world has been content with the acanthus leaf arranged round a bell for the capitals of columns of all architecture called classic, differing only in the more or less perfection of the modelling of the leaves, or the graceful or otherwise proportions of the bell; a modification in plan has but rarely been attempted. And this it was that opened the way to so much development in the Egyptian capital; beginning with the circle, they surrounded it with four, eight, and sixteen other circles. If the same change were attempted with the Corinthian capital, it could not fail to produce an entirely new order of forms whilst still retaining the idea of applying the acanthus leaf to the surface of a bell-shaped vase.

The shaft of the Egyptian column, when circular, was made to retain the idea of the triangular shape of the papyrus stalk, by three raised lines, which divided its circumference into three equal portions; when the column was formed by a union of four or eight shafts bound together, these had each a sharp arris on their outer face with the same intention. The crowning member or cornice of an Egyptian building was decorated with feathers, which appear to have been an emblem of sovereignty; whilst in the centre was the winged globe, emblem of divinity.

The second kind of Egyptian ornament results from the conventional representation of actual things on the walls of the temples and tombs; and here again, in the representations of offerings to the gods or of the various articles of daily use, in the paintings of actual scenes of their domestic life, every flower or other object is portrayed, not as a reality, but as an ideal representation. It is at the same time the record of a fact and an architectural decoration, to which even their hieroglyphical writing, explanatory of the scene, by its symmetrical arrangement added effect. In No. 4, on Plate IV., we have an example in the representation of three papyrus plants and three lotus flowers, with two buds, in the hand of a king as an offering to the gods. The arrangement is symmetrical and graceful, and